APPROVAL OF HONORS PROGRAM SENIOR PROJECT

Candidate

Anaya Sule

Project Title

Beyond the Library: The Ban on African American Literature

This Senior Project is approved as acceptable

Project Director

Dr. Kelvin Spragley

Committee Member

Mr. Chip Larkin

Committee Member

Dr. Margaret Love

Honors Program Co-Director

Dr. Bill Yankosky

Honors Program Co-Director

Dr. Fred Sanborn

April 28, 2026

Anaya Sule

Honor 402

27/April/26

Beyond The Library: The Ban on African American Literature

Forces within the U.S. education system are systematically removing African American literature and representations of their history. Students within the US education system have been impacted by book bans and challenges, making access to information difficult. Individual parents are targeting children's picture books, like Ruby Bridges “first day of school” and novels, like “The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison, to remove from the curriculum due to the literature being too “divisive” or “age inappropriate”. Censorship in K-12 libraries often involves issues such as identity or concepts like racism, police brutality, sexuality, code switching, black trauma, and more. The awareness of these problems is being stripped away from children's knowledge. During the 2022-2023 school year, the Poets, Essayists, and Novelists Association reported that “over 2,571 books written by black authors were banned” (PEN America 20).

Renewals of a significant number of banned books have happened before, but not at the level it has reached in recent years. The concept of book bans has gained popularity as it removes students access to relate to characters and similar experiences to the concepts engaged by these books, the response from parents, police, and political leaders as a reason to get black books pulled off the shelves. African American literature, such as writings from the Harlem Renaissance, was often censored and policed by members of white Supremacy such as critics and political leaders before books were banned. These challenges are largely driven by Organized groups, parents, and state-level legislative efforts to control discussions on systemic

oppression. The suppression of African American literature is frequently rooted in parents' harmful beliefs known as “White Guilt”. This is a term to describe the feelings of discomfort or responsibility that white people can experience learning about historical injustice (Sprunt 34). According to Barbara Sprunt, “since the 60s, white Americans have been grappling with the stigma, trying to prove that they are not racist, to prove the negative”.The term white guilt is institutionalized is schools, including in policies and narratives to display the idea topic making white students uncomfortable. White guilt has been a term used since the 1960s during the civil rights movement, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the legal end of segregation. White America could not ignore the history of racial oppression, and this contributed to the loss of moral authority within the United States. Behind the loss of moral authority, became the concept of white guilt today.

African American literature removal from the K-12 education and from historical representation in the United States. Examine the force, or forces, creating forces, creating the censorship of African American authors and the consequences of these bans for educational and historical representation is important to properly addressing this problem. Additionally, literature of all types has served as a cultural expression and a form of political resistance in the United States for young and old alike. If the nation is to keep expecting that literature will continue serving this purpose, certain actions must be taken. Specifically, African American literature is being removed from K-12 school systems because it challenges the superiority complex of white educational leaders in the United States. To examine this problem, this work will do the following: address the topic by identifying current censorship of African American authors, evaluate the reasons books are targeted for bans, and analyze the consequences of the removal of African American literature from the U.S. education system.

Literature Review

Contemporary books like *The Hate U Give by* Angie Thomas and Ibram X. Kendi, "Stamped from the Beginning", are frequently targeted alongside foundational classics like *The Color Purple*. This is a systematic censorship of black perspectives from the US education system due to the restriction of specific ideas in literature. According to center for American progression 22% of banned books address ideas of race and ideology. Policy makers claim these books portrayal Critical race theory, behind removal from K-12 curriculum. Most of these books are misinterpreted to address critical race theory instead of black experiences. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was an African American cultural movement that advanced black identity through literature. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes influenced African American a literature leading to present day book bans. The Harlem Renaissance was a powerful collection of challenging African American literature. Writers' use of different forms of literature, poetry, essays, and fiction reclaim narratives of black real-life experiences and challenge the ideologies embedded in American society.

The Educational environment is unwelcoming for black students to reinforce the comfort of white students. Certain topics are not approached in various schools' curricula because of the ideology of white guilt. Across the United States education system, the censorship of African American literature has been publicized in a negative light. It has been used to increase the restriction of access to specific stories. African American literature being banned intensified, showing a troubling effort to suppress stories that reveal black culture, history, identity, and social resistance.

Throughout the testament of American history, black people have been portrayed as inhumane. Slavery, race riots, segregation, Red Summer, police brutality, systematic racism, and various other instances illustrate this. Many outcomes of these events of time have been addressed throughout African American literature. A lot of Books by Black authors have been banned numerous times. According to PEN America, THUG by Angie Thomas has been documented banned at least eighty-five times since its release (PEN America 56). Books by Black authors explore themes such as segregation, racial injustice, police brutality, sexuality, and the legacy of slavery. Political leaders frame conversations around these topics to be taboo in every educational setting. Common African American banned books in schools and libraries center on these topics. Advocacy organizations, such as PEN America, have documented a significant rise in book bans during recent years, with thousands of titles being challenged or removed from the education system.

This pattern of censorship is a response to cultural movements to suppress discussions of race, diversity, and inequalities. Often, censorship within the education system carries the concept of protecting white students from feeling uncomfortable. Political leaders and parent's trying to silence African American narratives. A method to erase literature and exclude the real experiences of African Americans and maintain white supremacy culture. African American literature has been removed from many K-12 curricula, and its absence has crucial implications for education, cultural understanding, and public discourse. Policymakers and school boards often target books that resist stereotypes or feature Black protagonists, causing students to lose access to perspectives supporting historical awareness and critical thinking.

Policymakers and school boards increasingly remove texts that address racism within educational spaces because of the perception that those texts cause students to feel White Guilt.

Censorship changes not only the historical context but also undermines black student's ancestral experiences. It creates historical accounts to be subjective due to the erasure of black points of view.

Book bans are forms of suppression, and contemporary authors and advocates respond through initiatives like the banned book tour, which aims to protect intellectual freedom. Black literature has continually shaped conversations about identity and racial equality among those challenged or removed in schools and libraries across the United States, reflecting ongoing attempts to control historical and cultural narratives.

What is a Critical Race Theory?

In the 1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings adapted critical race theory from law school to education. This theory has become the pinnacle of intense school conversations in modern-day. Ladson-Billings introduced a theory to explain racial inequality within education. The critical race theory framework targets the way systemic racism currently operates within societal structures and dynamics. In recent years, policymakers, legislators, and parents have mischaracterized this theory to publicize their own agenda by spreading their misinterpretations of its meaning. Because critical race theory is significantly misunderstood, many concepts that have no relation are tied together in the discourse around this term. Jill Anderson from Harvard Ed Cast has said: "Today the theory is widely misunderstood and being used as an umbrella term for anything tied to race and education" (Reese 73). One of the first publicized introductions of the CRT in a political context is President Donald Trump's 2020 campaign calling it "Radical indoctrination of the nation's children." (Trump 2020). President Trump claimed CRT verges on the psychological abuse of children and that "anti-racists" initiatives created racial division

among the nation's children. Anti-racism in literature and practice is not necessarily tied to each other.

In the President Trump campaign in 2020 and 2024, there have been specific attacks on critical race theory, which has taken on an entirely different meaning than its purpose. According to Ladson-Billings, the adoption of critical race theory is a tool that begins in legal studies and is used in law school. Political leaders connect anything dealing with explaining inequalities to CRT and often claim that is taught in K-12. Actual critical race theory does not show up in curricula until at least undergraduate coursework and mostly appears at the graduate school level. A mispresented claim of CRT would be the *1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones is targeted because it's it is labeled as “Divisive indoctrination” and inaccurately portrays American history. As a result of these claims on the 1619 project, six states and counting have created legal bans on this piece of Journalism. The 1619 Project is a journalistic approach to telling the history of slavery and its ongoing influence on modern-day US society.

The Concept of Banned Books

Books that are considered banned are taken off library shelves, school curricula, and, in extreme cases, prohibited school grounds due to objections to their content. Banned books have escalated in a significant way, affecting the US education system. Specifically, banned books by Black authors are challenged in various ways to block their content. This is not only an attack on Black culture but on literature as well. Black literature has been around for decades, even leading back to slavery as a way to communicate with one another. Removing banned books from schools and libraries has significant consequences. It limits access to important information, diverse perspectives, and learning from different experiences. Banning books within the US

education system sends a message that Black voices and historical events are not welcome. In 2022, areas like Florida, Missouri, South Carolina, and Utah had the highest number of books removed from classrooms and other places where they could be accessed (Lowery 34).

The dramatic escalation of Book bans isn't a coincidence; they're carried out methodically by parents, political organizations, and policymakers. In states like Texas and Florida, books for children, such as Ruby Bridge's goes to school picture books, were banned. Parents of students felt that it was teaching second-graders critical race theory by promoting division and the use of harsh language (Rozsa, Ruby Bridges, 35). Parents misinformation of CRT is carried into any books dealing with race and gender. Many claim books teaching CRT haven't been read by parents and political leaders making them. Ruby Bridges was the first African American student to desegregate an all-white elementary school in New Orleans. On November 14th, 1960, Ruby Bridges walked into William Frantz Elementary, escorted by federal Marshals. She was greeted by racism and racial slurs before entering the building. The book *I am Ruby Bridge*s identifies its audience as young children ages 4 to 10. It is essentially a children's picture book, but it has been claimed to teach children critical race theory from parents as part of an anti-critical race theory movement.

In discussing the book *Ruby Bridges Goes to School* Moms for Liberty local Tennessee leader Robin Stenman expressed that a "large crowd of angry white people who didn't want Black children in a white school' was harsh and she also mentioned that the book didn't offer 'redemption' at the end of the story"(Banned Library 69). This book initiated the conversation among policymakers, parents, and organization leaders to push Tennessee's "prohibited concept of law". This ban prevents teachers from teaching 14 divisive concepts. This law states the prohibited concept teachings as the ideas that "one sex is superior to another. An individual

should feel discomfort, guilt, or anguish solely because of their race or sex. The US is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist. Meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist. The rule of law does not exist but is rather a series of power relationships" (Tennessee Code §49-6-1019). While this law does not specifically mention critical race theory, it targets many concepts associated with it due to its vagueness. Forty-four states have introduced bills to restrict the teaching of critical race theory. This is an attempt to shield white kids within the US education system to feel bad about historical experiences.

In January 2021, twenty states were imposing bans and restrictions through legislation or other avenues" (Education Week 8). States like Montana, North Dakota, Idaho, Wyoming, South Dakota, Iowa, Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Indiana, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, Virginia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida have created a anti CRT bill. Certain states have enacted legislation to restrict the teaching of divisive topics to students. Due to this legislation, many books written by black authors are targeted with bans.

Identifying Current Censorship

What is Censorship?

Censorship is understood in scholarly research as the intentional suppression and regulation of expression, information, and ideas. This suppression occurs when authorities seek to maintain social, moral, or political control. Morrison explains that censorship has historically been tied to judgment and blame to protect the narrative from being portrayed. Some contemporary studies show that censorship continues to shape democratic life, for example, in analyses of book bans in the U.S. education system. Book bans are a modern form of censorship, often emerging from political pressure and significant parental involvement to public access for

knowledge. Censorship in academic settings restricts the circulation of knowledge and research by suppressing facts that challenge social or political narratives. Censorship is not only the removal of content but a powerful approach to silence certain voices from ideas of truths about social constructs.

Why does Censorship happen?

Censorship is an ongoing issue because certain groups attempt to control which ideas can be accessible, often due to protecting social and political norms that are threatened. Throughout American history, policymakers and political leaders have restricted books they view as dangerous and unethical and have long used censorship to control taboo content. This attempt to control certain knowledge shapes what society is allowed to think or question. Like religious institutions, once-banned texts that are considered unfaithful, and later governments targeted work labeled " un-American. Reflecting upon a purposeful effort to limit certain themes that challenge the dynamic power structure in the United States. In the modern context, censorship often is seen when books address topics such as racism, sexuality, political opposition, police brutality, and other issues that certain groups find inappropriate or uncomfortable.

These challenges come from schools, religious organizations, community leaders, and government officials who argue that censorship protects readers from offensive or controversial material. Restricting access to specific content limits free expression and potentially hinders critical thinking by preventing readers from engaging in complex ideas. Censorship claims to be a working solution protecting society from any attempts to challenge the ideology behind America's unity.

What does the removal of African American Literature look like?

Book Bans and the Suppression of Black Literature Book Bans and the Suppression of Black Literature

In recent years, the United States has experienced a considerable rise in book bans. Specifically, the ones that are being targeted by black authors address everyday problems such as race, identity, gender, history, and civil rights. This trend of suppressing certain literature has been happening for generations, with plenty of examples of Black authors' voices being silenced. From the Harlem Renaissance to James Baldwin and the civil rights era, Black authors have faced different variations of censorship and attempts to take control of their narratives. The extensive repertoire of writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay, just to name a few. This reveals the reactions of White audiences to these bodies of work, and the way contemporary book bans contribute to this extensive legacy of silencing.

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance during 1910-1930 was a focal point of a cultural movement in which Black Writers, artists, and philosophers formed a coalition to assert a vision of black identity. It represented a collaborative effort to redefine the meaning of black in America.

There were various pieces of literature that challenged social structures and celebrated Black Culture. Korka Sall argues that the movement “was detrimental in the celebration of the black race and in redefining the notion of being Black in America in a more positive way” (Sall 2). Harlem became the center of artistic revolution and racial pride. The Harlem Renaissance provoked fear among white Americans who weren't used to black people asserting authority. Gene Andrew Jarrett said that “early critics often dismissed Harlem Renaissance writers as politically naïve or overly radical, reflecting broader discomfort with Black autonomy” (Jarrett

660). A few white audience members supported some of the artists but tried to frame their work to meet their expectations. This created a dynamic in which black writers were celebrated for their innovation yet restrained by a racial political agenda. Langston Hughes became a distinct voice of the Harlem Renaissance, embracing black experiences, music, and hardships.

While white readers appreciated his artistry, there was a negative pushback on his portrayal of the realities within black livelihood. It was mentioned that “Hughes rejected the idea that Black writers should cater to white tastes, famously criticizing Black artists who sought white approval” (Jarrett 45). White critics often accused Hughes of promoting division and being too politically woke as his work aligned with leftist politics. His association with the criticism of racism led to significant FBI surveillance and accusations of rebellion. These reactions towards his work reveal the way his work is viewed as threatening due to empowering blackness.

Zora Neale Hurston's reception among white audiences was equally complicated. Many white readers praised her authentic portrayal of black folklore, but often through a patronizing lens. They treated her writing as an exotic interest rather than considering it serious literature. Hurston's refusal to write plain literature frustrated white liberals who had the expectation to focus on racial injustice in their own political views. White publishers shaped her the way her work was marketed, focusing on its “folk” qualities while downplaying her criticism of power and gender. This handpicked acceptance of her work reveals how white audiences attempted to control the black narratives authors produced to fit their expectations.

Another example is Claude McKay. He is among the most politically outspoken writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Due to being vocal, he faces some of the most jarring white backlash from white supremacists. In 1919, his poem "If We Must Die," written during the Red Summer

and exposing racial violence, was interpreted as a call to black resistance. This poem's aggressive tone alarmed white authorities, who saw it as a starting point for an uprising. McKay's involvement with Marxism and verbal attacks on colonialism and racism, escalated white fear. Scholars note that “white critics often labeled him 'dangerous' or 'radical,” reflecting anxieties about Black political consciousness (Jarrett 51). McKay's experience illustrates white audiences' reaction to black writers who challenge racial constructs.

Another Known writer, a literary descendant of the Harlem Renaissance, contributed to the civil rights era. His work, such as essays, speeches, and novels, confronted the psychological and systemic realities of racism in America. Various white critics accused him of being “too angry,” “too political,” or “anti-American,” particularly after the publication of The Fire Next Time (Religion: Down at the Cross,” Time). His honest conversations about race, sexuality, and identity made white audiences uncomfortable, and due to his queer identity, further increased criticism. Baldwin's writings were also monitored by the FBI, which saw his critiques of America's system as corrupting. Today, Baldwin's work is still frequently challenged and banned in schools within the US due to the discomfort it causes among white peers.

Civil Rights Era Literature and White Resistance

The Civil Rights era produced an influential body of literature documenting police brutality, segregation, and the struggle for equality. Works by Baldwin, Malcom X, Angela Davis, and others were always met with resistance. Many white Americans viewed these writings as threats to social power. Throne and Stewart argued that “censorship of such works functions as a form of marginalization of intellectual freedom, particularly in educational settings

where discussions of race are already contested" (Throne and Stewart 4). The FBI surveilled plenty of Black activists and authors, treating their writings as evidence of political radicalism. This historical pattern of suppression parallels the modern movement of book bans targeting black literature. The recent rise in book bans demonstrates the continuous issue caused by the suppression of Black literature. According to the American Bar Association, the 2022–23 school year saw over 3,300 instances of book bans in U.S. public schools, disproportionately affecting books by Black and LGBTQ+ authors (ABA). These bans repeat the same historical reactions of white audiences as a form of control over black narratives. From the Harlem Renaissance to the civil rights era, leading into the present, black authors continue to face censorship to restrict their influence.

Erasing the Archive

Removal of African American literature is not an innocent action; it is a suppression of culture and politics. The works of, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and many other authors are very important for helping us understand the Black experience and the struggle against inequality in America. It challenges us to face uncomfortable truths about America's past and present without these works of literature in the K-12 curriculum. The burning of Black-owned newspapers and businesses during the Tulsa race massacre.

From the FBI's attempt to oversee surveillance over the Black Panther publications to the recent circumstances of the banning of Black literature in US schools. "The Black Panther Party understood this deeply, which is why they invested so heavily in education as a tool for liberation (Stanford Digital Repository). The banning of literature continues to be an attempt to control the way race, resistance, and national identity are thought about within America. The common attempts behind erasure can be seen when Black literature challenges race or violence

perpetrated by the state; it is banned or challenged. This is not an innocent action; it is a suppression of culture and politics. The works of Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and many other authors are very important for helping us understand the Black experience and the struggle against inequality in America. It challenges us to face uncomfortable truths about America's past and present without these works of literature in the K-12 curriculum, such as the burning of Black-owned newspapers and businesses during the Tulsa race massacre. From the FBI's attempt to oversee surveillance over the Black Panther publications to the recent circumstances of banning Black literature in US schools. The Black Panther Party understood this deeply, which is why they invested so heavily in education as a tool for liberation (Stanford Digital Repository 89). The banning of literature continues to be an attempt to control the way race, resistance, and national identity are thought about within America. The common attempts behind erasure can be seen when Black literature challenges race or violence perpetrated by the state; it is banned or challenged.

Tulsa Massacre

The 1921 Tulsa Massacre represents one of the most violent instances of the removal of Black literature and historical memory. During the attack on the Greenwood District, known as "Black Wall Street". White mobs not only killed residents and destroyed homes but also burned Black-owned newspapers, libraries, and personal archives. The National Archives describes how "scores of the city's Black residents were dead, and dozens of blocks of homes, businesses, and livelihoods were destroyed" (National Archives). The destruction included two Black newspapers, a school, a library, and numerous businesses that housed written records of Black life (Beinecke Library). These materials documented profitable success, political activism, and

community outreach. Their destruction was not incidental; it was an attempt to erase both the people and the record of their existence. For decades afterward, the massacre itself was excluded from various textbooks and public discourse, demonstrating how violence and silence work together to remove Black history from the nation's narrative.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panther Party published a range of literature, including *The Black Panther* newspaper, political education materials, and writings on police brutality and self-defense. These publications were the fundamentals of the Panthers' mission of raising political responses and documenting state violence against Black communities. The U.S. government responded by criminalizing the Panthers' literature. Through "COINTELPRO", the FBI targeted the distribution of Panther publications, raided printing sites, and seized educational materials. Possession of Panther literature could lead to surveillance or arrest. This represents a direct form of state-led censorship: the suppression of Black political writing because it challenged state authority and exposed systemic racism. The Panther's experience demonstrates how Black literature that critiques government power is often treated as a threat to national security rather than a legitimate form of political expression.

Why are books banned? An Evaluation.

Themes in Black Literature that are being Censored

Black literature is disproportionately a target for censorship and suppression on challenging racism, systemic inequality, identity, and history. Reporting by the ACLU has shown that book bans in the United States have increased, with schools and libraries removing works that address social injustice (ACLU). Authors of color are now 4.5 times more likely to have their books banned than a white author (ACLU). This demonstrates that censorship significantly

affects narratives that confront oppression and amplify black voices. Advocacy organizations note this pattern has been repeated throughout history. Black literature has been censored since at least the Harlem Renaissance, when black writers were consistently labeled as dangerous or inappropriate because they wrote to expose racial violence and cultural narratives. The Harlem Renaissance asserted that black humanity and artistic independence were important. It has been pointed out that removing books by authors of color limits students' access to diverse voices and reinforces harmful patterns of exclusion. Many of the most frequently banned books by black authors explore slavery, experiences from Jim Crow, segregation, and the fight against racial injustice. Understanding central themes of American history and identity is often opposed in contemporary political debates. Targeting work addressing intersectional themes such as LGBTQ+ identities and feminism is frequently labeled as harmful and anti-American. These novels represent an entire spectrum of black experiences and cultural expressions. These redundant patterns reveal that the themes being censored in black literature are the ones exposing historical truth and empowering minority communities. This makes suppression a significant threat to intellectual freedom and historical understanding.

The Hate U Give

THUG by Angie Thomas was published in 2017 by Harper Collins. It is about a 16-year-old Starr Carter riding home from a house party with her childhood best friend Khalil. After a shootout at the house party, Starr and Khalil fled down the street and were eventually stopped by the police. Within minutes, Khalil was asked to leave the vehicle. He was killed by a police officer, and Starr was the only witness to his murder. Star lives in a low-income, predominantly black neighborhood, Garden Heights, but attends a white private school, Williamson Prep, on the other side of town. She spent years learning to code-switch between these two environments to

interact with her classmates without appearing ghetto. After her best friend Khalil died, these two worlds collided in various ways. Starr is presented with a challenging choice: speak up for her friend or let the public frame her friend as a “thug”. She was pressured not to speak up by gang members within her community, known as the king lords, who once her father was a part of before going to prison.

THUG has faced at least 85 bans in the United States in 2021, according to PEN America. This book has been removed from library shelves in multiple states and school districts. According to parents and policymakers, THUG depicted an anti-police bias. Parents called this initiative harmful, sending messages to young adults not to trust the police. Another claim had to do with the various drug references and profanity due to the mention of the king lords. Gangs are a reality in various low-income environments. According to the National Youth Gang Survey report, at least 71% of gang presence indicates the spread of gang influence, but many of these problems stem from low-income urban areas” (National Youth Gang Survey). Thomas decided to include the concept of neighborhood gangs to explain their impact on these low-income communities. There have been claims that the call to action against systemic racism makes readers uncomfortable. As well as a huge increase in the amount of violence and language used throughout the book. This book was written by Angie Thomas as a response to the murders of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, and countless others. This was her opportunity to give young readers a safe space to turn their pain into power. The Hate U Give is banned because it challenges parents' comfort level about the context of systemic racism. This book is considered among the banned books because it is Thomas's way to address the realities about race that many white parents would like to ignore.

Clap When You land

Clap When You Land by Elizabeth Acevedo is a coming-of-age novel. It has been targeted in a significant wave of bans on young adult literature. The political climate surrounding school libraries raised concern among parents. The conversation around clapping when you land reflects the way young people aren't allowed to read stories involving ideas about race, identity, and trauma. School districts that have removed *Clap When You Land* have cited its explicit mature themes involving sexual assault. This novel includes references to harassment, complex family dynamics, and sexual assault. These topics are sensitive but happen in modern day society, allowing parents to mislabel these experiences as inappropriate for teenagers. The book explored the grief of a tragic plane crash, the discovery of family secrets, and the emotional struggles of siblings living in two different places. A few administrators argue that these are too heavy for high school readers.

Elizabeth Acevedo falls into the category of most frequently banned books, as it centers on the lives of two Afro-Latina characters, Camino and Yahaira Rios. This novel explores issues of identity, social inequality, and Dominican culture. In the sense banned books are a larger social struggle over which stories are told in classrooms. Those who support banning this book focused on the concern of age appropriateness due to the sexual assault that happened to the siblings. A few parents expressed their discomfort with the book's exploration of sexuality, family secrets, harassment, and experiences of life in minority communities. *Clap When You Land* has been banned or challenged in multiple districts for alleged sexual content, despite being a widely acclaimed novel in verse" (PEN America 45). Clap when you land provides students with opportunities to learn about empathy, grief, and reflection on diverse cultural experiences represented. The conversation over clapping when you land is another example of tension between protecting students from the overwhelming feeling of white guilt and preparing them for

reality. Moreover, the banning of this book raises questions about equal representation in modern-day society. This story's removal from shelves deprived students of access to a form of literature that reflects diversity within the United States. Clap when you land was banned, not because it was harmful, but because of the portrayal of two Dominican sisters' daily lives. Having Afro-Latina characters challenges traditional societal norms taught in classrooms. This controversy reflects a huge struggle over representation within education, and the role literature plays in young students' understanding of themselves and others.

I am Alfonso Jones

I Am Alfonso Jones by Tony Medina follows the story of Alfonso, a Black teenager from Harlem, New York City. He is extremely excited about playing Hamlet in his school's hip-hop production and about expressing his feelings to his friend Danetta. While shopping for his first suit, he is shot and killed by an off-duty police officer who mistakes the clothes hanger for a gun. This was loosely based on the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2014. After his death, Alfonso found himself on a subway train in the afterlife, surrounded by other victims of racial violence. From Alfonso's view, he consistently watches how his friends and family respond to his murder. The story jumps between Alfonso's memories, the aftermath of the shooting, and the historical context behind police brutality. This graphic novel explores the themes of systemic injustice, grief, and the resilience of people of color. This graphic novel is banned in several states within the US education system because of the context of "Woke" themes (Medina, "I Am Alfonso Jones"). Parents continued to claim that these work-themed themes are considerably more harmful to students' education. This novel is supposedly a display of gun violence and anti-police ideas that forced policymakers to remove it.

All Boys Aren't Blue

All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson is a memoir-manifesto of his experiences. This book has become one of the most challenging books in the United States. The novel is written as a series of personal essays that explore Johnson's experiences growing up as a young black queer person. It addresses themes of identity, family trauma, and sexuality. It has been banned in several school districts due to the political claims of this narrative indoctrinating America's children. The primary reason *All Boys Aren't Blue* has been removed from school libraries due to the discussion of sexuality and queer identity. Critics argue this book contains "sexually explicit" material through scenes in question of Johnson's coming of age story. Many school boards used passages of his sexual awakening to justify the removal of this book to prove it's not suitable for minors.

Johnson has addressed the criticism, explaining that the book's truth is essential for young queer readers who rarely see their experiences depicted in literature. In an interview with The Guardian, Johnson stated: "I wrote this book, so queer kids could see themselves and know they are not alone" (George M Johnson," The Guardian"*).*The controversy surrounding this novel reveals a double standard for heterosexual coming-of-age stories, which often include similar themes without facing the same level of criticism. The discomfort stems from the presence of queer sexuality, but not the presence of sexuality. All Boys Aren't Blue has been swept into large political motives to restrict discussion of race, systemic inequality, and LGBTQ+ identity in school curricula. Johnson explained, "My book is being banned because it tells the truth about what it means to grow up Black and queer in America" (Johnson 18). Once again, the same pattern of targeted removal of specific books suggests deeper discomfort with POC identities. The result of the banning of all boys who aren't blue from schools is for queer students of color

the lack of representation that is often missing. The absence reinforces feelings of alienation, invisibility, and isolation for the targeted audience, limiting educational freedom. Johnson has emphasized the impact of these bans on K-12 education. “When you ban books about people like me, you are telling kids like me that their lives don't matter” (Johnson). This captures the political and emotional weight of the controversy. Johnson's memoir challenges dominant narratives by centering the experiences of black queer youth. This removal reflects the importance of academic freedom and inclusive storytelling.

Black Birds In the Sky

BBITS by Brandy Colbert is a story about the legacy of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The Tulsa race massacre involved the destruction of the black community of Greenwood. The murder of hundreds of black residents and the burning of businesses. The Greenwood community is known as “Black Wall Street”. Where every business was owned by a person of color. This book examines one of the most violent acts of racial terrorism in American history. The book is a narrative to illuminate the causes and aftermath of the Tulsa massacre. Despite the educational value of this book, it has been banned in several U.S school districts. These bans reflect political conflicts over race, violence, and systematic injustice, which should be taught in schools. Black Birds in the Sky reveals the deeper mental impact of America's racial past and acknowledges its effect on the present. Another primary reason black birds in the sky have been challenged is their violent depiction of instances dealing with racial violence.

Some parents and school boards argue that the book’s descriptions of violence are “too graphic” or “disturbing” for students. However, Colbert has emphasized that the truth of the event cannot be solved. During an interview with NPR, she explained, “We cannot understand

our present if we refuse to look honestly at our past" (Jesmyn Ward on Understanding Our Past, NPR). Historical accuracy challenges the tendency to erase episodes of racial terror from the K-12 curriculum. Violence allows for some districts to acknowledge the truth as socially threatening.

The banning of *Black Birds in the sky* is a political movement to restrict discussions of inequality, systemic racism, and race in schools. Colbert has spoken about this trend, stating, "It's frightening to see history being erased in real time" (NPR). Colbert argues that "banning books about racism does not protect students; it prevents them from understanding the world they live in. (NPR). School districts often claim that the book promotes a political agenda, but these accusations are misunderstandings of historical nonfiction. This book does not advocate ideology but presents documented events. Many challenges to *Black Birds in the Sky* stem from the misconception that the book teaches Critical race theory. Colbert's book explicitly examines historical roots and has been incorrectly categorized as CRT. Due to this misinterpretation, it has been called for removal, even though the book is simply presenting historical facts. As Colbert noted in a Los Angeles Times interview, "Telling the truth about racism is not the same as teaching critical race theory" (Los Angeles Times 17). The bans reflect a misunderstanding not only of the book, and the academic concepts critics claim to oppose, but also of the very concept of censorship. Another reason the book has been banned is due to the fear of exposing students to stories of racial injustice because it will make them view the United States in a negative manner. Some School boards have argued that this book could make students "feel guilty" or "shame" about this historical event. This argument takes away the focus from victims of racial violence. It also assumes that patriotism requires ignoring historical wrongdoing. Colbert rejects this idea, stating, "Loving your country means wanting it to be better, and that starts with knowing the

truth" (The Guardian*)*. The removal of *Black Birds in the Sky* from school libraries has significant consequences that impact the students negatively. Students lose access to well-researched and accessible accounts of important events in American history. This ban sends a message that certain perspectives of history that involve black oppression are not valued or welcomed in educational spaces within the US. This book challenges readers to confront the realities of racial violence and the long-term impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Its removal reflects broader cultural control over how America's past should be taught and who gets to decide which stories are told. Black Birds in the Sky is a powerful message because of the importance of understanding history, even its painful chapters.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston, is considered one of the most important works of African American literature. The book follows Janie Crawford's exploration of themes of love, race, gender roles, and the journey toward self-discovery. Despite the book's literary importance, it has been banned multiple times in the US school system. These challenges are from concerns about sexual content, profanity, and the book's portrayal of black womanhood. The controversy surrounding this novel reflects modern-day cultural uncertainty over the stories that are allowed to be told in educational spaces. One of the main reasons for the ban of Their eyes were watching God is the number of sexual themes and profanity. According to the American Library Association, the novel has been the target of numerous complaints over the years due to its language. One parent specifically objected to its "sexual explicitness and language" (43). Although the novel does not contain graphic sexual scenes, it does portray Janie's marital relationships with an emotional journey. Critics often mistake these depictions of realism as inappropriate, even though they are crucial to the novel exploration of Janie's identity.

These challenges reveal the unsettled feeling of narratives that center black women's sexuality on their own terms. Throughout the novel, Janie's search for independence through three marriages and personal struggle has sometimes been misread as promoting immorality or rebellion. However, the novel is a story focused on women's empowerment that can potentially inspire younger generations to discover themselves. This act of independence, especially in a Black female protagonist, has historically made some readers and parents uncomfortable, contributing to the book's censorship.

Hurston's novel is often challenged because it centers a Black woman's voice in a way that defies traditional expectations" (Wall 62). Hurston's novel foregrounds black voices, dialect, and culture, causing its dismissal and undervalued critics. Earlier criticisms of this book came from within the black literature community, where some male critics objected that Hurston focused on a Black woman making her own choices in life. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has reappeared on banned book lists because of the scrutiny of literature reflecting on America's problems with race, gender, and identity. The novel's exploration of love and self-determination offers students a valuable insight into black womanhood.

Modern Day Impact

Today, the removal of Black literature continues to be a general book ban of black authors in the U.S. education system. According to the American Bar Association, the 2022–23 school year saw more than 3,300 book bans, disproportionately targeting works by Black and LGBTQ+ authors (American Bar Association). Books regarding slavery, segregation, police violence, and civil rights are frequently challenged under the justification of preventing "divisive" concepts. Books dealing with the Tulsa Massacre have been removed from classrooms

in multiple states. Multiple pieces of work by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and contemporary Black authors have been banned for addressing racism or sexuality. In some districts, entire Black History Month displays have been taken down, and federal agencies have paused Black history programming due to political pressure. Modern book bans tie back to earlier forms of suppression. State governments tend to seek control over which stories about Black life are allowed to be taught, read, or even remembered. The removal of Black literature in the United States is not a new circumstance but a recurring strategy for maintaining racial hierarchies. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Tulsa Massacre, to the Black Panther Party, and even today's book bans, Black writers and communities have faced efforts to muzzle their voices and erase their history. Whether through physical destruction, criminalization, or educational censorship, the suppression of Black literature reflects a general struggle over defining American identity.

Addressing the Issue of removal

The exclusion of African American literature from school curricula signifies a significant disconnection from the preservation of Black culture and Americans' understanding of its racial issues. African American literature has been a means of documenting black experiences within America, combating racial oppression, and establishing culture. Kenneth W. Warren states that "African American literature came as a reaction to social and political conditions under segregation, and as such, it is a fundamental part of understanding how race has affected America" (Warren 369–379). The ban of these texts in the school curriculum, therefore, signifies a disconnection from voices that highlight slavery, Jim Crow, and racial inequality in America. Sheena Michele Mason asserts that "African American literature cannot be understood without the history of racism in America, and it plays a significant role in anti-racism discourse, as it reveals how race is constructed and maintained" (Mason 41–68). The banning of these texts not

only detaches students from a critical historical narrative; it also disengages them from a means of discussing complex social justice issues.

Effects on Modern-Day Society

The removal of African American literature in the classroom has a significant impact on modern-day society, especially since we live in a time where racial tensions and misinformation are society's standard. Without the involvement of African American literature, students are not provided with a full perspective on history and its impact in the present day. According to Elizabeth McHenry, "African American literary traditions have played a significant role in expanding our cultural record and challenging dominant narratives that have historically marginalized African American voices" (McHenry 295). Without the use of these texts, society is left with a further sense of racial ignorance and the continuation of stereotypes that are passed down from generation to generation without the means for young adults to think critically about these issues. On a larger scale, the removal of African American literature from the classroom undermines America's principles by denying our youth access to knowledge and freedom of speech that will allow them to become well-rounded students.

Conclusion

Overall, the removal of African literature from K-12 schools is an upward trend of deliberate censorship. It reflects and reinforces the supremacy complex embedded within the U.S educational system. Given the current censorship of African American authors, this study identifies justifications for book banning and analyzes how they impact the educational setting. Especially due to the banning of black literature, limiting freedom, and altering history, making information less obtainable. Regarding future recommendations to counteract book bans, it is

recommended to advocate for proper curriculum policies with the state legislature that require diverse representation in teaching materials. Support students with resources to navigate censorship and maintain inclusive practices for information not taught in school. Unite as a community by partnering with authors, scholars, and educational institutions to raise literary contributions through events and workshops and digital archives. Creating spaces to preserve access to black literature in the US education system and within the communities. Allowing the reasons for banning books to involve the parents' entire neighborhood and allowing objections to categorize these books. For example, a Tulsa organization established banned-book libraries to ensure that students can still access materials outside of school. Having a banned books section in K-12 school libraries, categorized by age group. Create an inclusive society to allow all students to understand not only historical truth, but also the experiences that have led to the present.

Works Cited

American Bar Association. "Exposing the Impact of Curriculum and Book Bans: Education for the Public and Not the Few." *ABA Civil Rights and Social Justice Section*, 23 Jan. 2024, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/on-demand/exposing-impact-curriculum-book-bans-education-public-not-few/.

American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts. "Banned Books by Black Authors." *ACLU Massachusetts*, 2023, https://www.aclum.org/banned-books-black-authors/.

American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee. *Frequently Asked Questions: Critical Race Theory*. ACLU-TN, May 2022, www.aclu-tn.org/app/uploads/2022/05/CRT-FAQ.pdf.

Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. "1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: Resources in the Collections." *Yale University*, 2021, https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/tulsa1921.

Bissell, Tess. "Teaching in the Upside Down: What Critical Anti-Race Theory Laws Tell Us About the First Amendment." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 75, 2023, pp. 205–240, https://review.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/01/Bissell-75-Stan.-L.-Rev.-205.pdf.

Committee on Education and the Workforce. "Stop Misleading Americans—Critical Race Theory Is Being Taught in Schools." *U.S. House of Representatives*, 29 Dec. 2021, https://edworkforce.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=407991.

DoSomething.org. "Banned Books by Black Authors." *DoSomething.org*, 2023, https://dosomething.org/article/banned-books-by-black-authors.

Gabbatt, Adam. "Ruby Bridges Book Banned in Tennessee School District amid Civil Rights Backlash." *The Guardian*, 26 Apr. 2024, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/apr/26/ruby-bridges-book-ban-civil-rights.

Galgay, Corinne E. *Affective Costs of Whiteness: Examining the Role of White Guilt and White Shame*. Columbia University, 2018. *Academic Commons*, https://doi.org/10.7916/D80S168D.

Gassam Asare, Janice. "Reading as Resistance: How Silencing Black Stories Fuels Workplace Erasure." *Forbes*, 15 Mar. 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2025/03/15/reading-as-resistance-how-silencing-black-stories-fuels-workplace-erasure/.

Harker, S. T. "Ruby Bridges Goes to School by Ruby Bridges." *Banned Library*, 4 Apr. 2023, www.bannedlibrary.com/podcast/2023/4/4/ruby-bridges-goes-to-school-by-ruby-bridges.

History of Liberation Schools. *Stanford University Liberation School Archive*, Stanford University Libraries, https://exhibits.stanford.edu.

Jarrett, Gene Andrew. "The Harlem Renaissance and Its Indignant Aftermath: Rethinking Literary History and Political Action after Black Studies." *American Literary History*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2011, pp. 657–680.

Karson Institute for Race, Peace & Social Justice. *Critical Race Theory: What Is Not*. Loyola University Maryland, 2021, https://www.loyola.edu/_media/join-us/karson-institute/documents/Critical%20Race%20Theory%20What%20it%20is%20not.pdf.

Macchi, Victoria. "Featured Document: Remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre." *National Archives*, 3 May 2021, https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/tulsa-massacre-100-years.

Malcolm X, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Ballantine Books, 1992.

Mason, Sheena Michele. "African American Literature and Anti-Racism Practices." *Theory of Racelessness*, Springer Nature, 2022, pp. 41–68. https://www.earfluence.com/anti-racism-and-the-theory-of-racelessness-with-dr-sheena-mason/.

McArdle, Elaine. "Book Bans and the Librarians Who Won't Be Hushed." *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, Nov. 2023, https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/ed-magazine/23/11/book-bans-and-librarians-who-wont-be-hushed.

McHenry, Dean. “African American Literature.” *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr., Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 289–305.

National Archives. “Featured Document: Remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre.” 2021.

Phillips, Mary, and Angela LeBlanc-Ernest. *The Hidden Narratives: Recovering and (Re)Visioning the Community Activism of Men in the Black Panther Party*. IP History Project, iphistoryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/the-hidden-narratives.pdf

Ray, Victor. “A Theory of Racialized Organizations.” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2019, pp. 26–53. PubMed Central, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0003122418822335.

Sall, Korka. “The Harlem Renaissance: A Celebration of the Black Race.” *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2024, pp. 1–8.

Sawchuk, Stephen. “Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack.” *Education Week*, 10 June 2021, www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06.

Sprunt, Barbara. “Trump Tells Agencies to End Trainings on White Privilege and Critical Race Theory.” *NPR*, 5 Sept. 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/09/05/910053496/trump-tells-agencies-to-end-trainings-on-white-privilege-and-critical-race-theory.

Stanford Digital Repository. “Black Panther Party Educational Materials.” Stanford University Libraries, https://purl.stanford.edu/ss467gm4429.

Throne, Robin, and Tricia J. Stewart. “A Critical Policy Analysis of Book Bans in U.S. Public Higher Education as Marginalization of Intellectual Freedom.” 2024 Conference Paper.

Trump, Donald J. “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling.” *The White House*, 20 Jan. 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-indoctrination-in-k-12-schooling/.

Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Indiana University Press, 1995. *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/womenofharlemren00wall/page/n5/mode/2up.

Warren, Kenneth W. “Back to Black: African American Literary Criticism in the Present Moment.” *American Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1, Spring 2022, pp. 369–379. Oxford Academic, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajab082